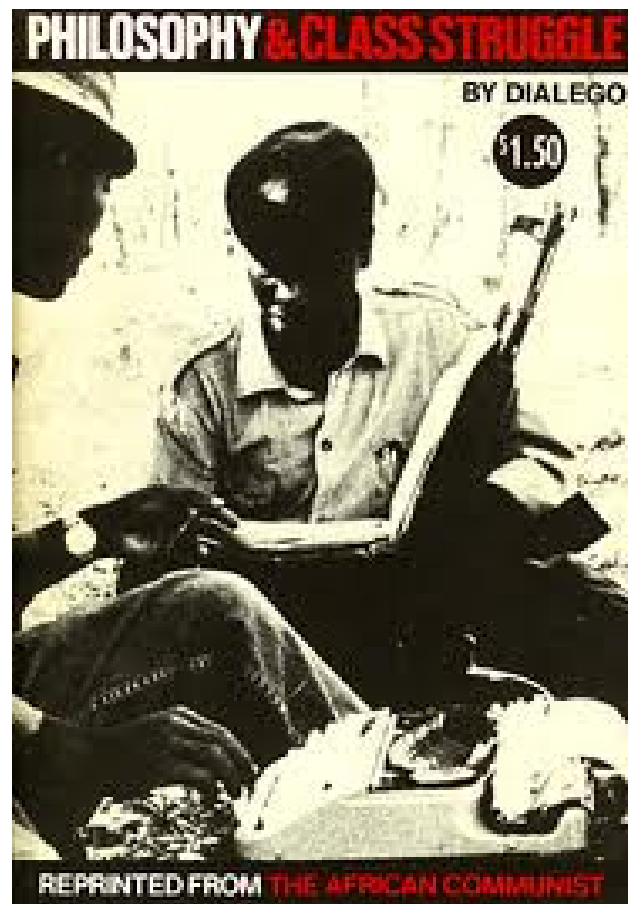


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Philosophy and Class Struggle

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Chapter 2

What is Dialectical Materialism?

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In a previous article on "Philosophy and Class Struggle" it was argued that dialectical materialism is the only logical and consistent philosophy for a revolutionary today to hold. Understood concretely and applied creatively, dialectical materialism has a crucial role to play in helping revolutionaries formulate their strategy and tactics in such a way that they reflect the needs of the situation and take all the relevant factors into account.

Those who stress materialism at *the expense of* dialectics in their political practice will ignore the pressures for change steadily building up (witness the dramatic street battles in the South African cities and townships since June this year), while those who see *only* dialectics and neglect materialism, inevitably overlook the concrete realities of the situation and the particular stage of the struggle.

This is why a proper understanding of dialectical materialism is a necessary part of our correct political practice; it furnishes the Communist Party and the liberation movement with an essential weapon in the on-going struggle and is a vital ingredient for success.

My basic objective in this article is to show that dialectics and materialism - the two aspects of Marxist philosophy which give it its name - form the two halves of a single whole. Just as a chemist mixes hydrogen and oxygen to form water, so Marx and Engels reworked the theories of dialectics and materialism which previous thinkers had developed, in order to create a revolutionary philosophy of a new type. For the first time in history a materialist theory of the universe was worked

out which was thoroughly *dialectical* in character, and a conception of dialectics developed that was squarely based on *materialism*.

The result is a highly explosive revolutionary mix!

To explain how this took place and why it was necessary, we must first of all get to grips with

(i) Materialism Vs. Idealism: the Basic Question of Philosophy

It is sometimes thought that a "materialist" is a person who simply looks after his own selfish interests whereas an "idealist" is one who is prepared to sacrifice for a worthwhile cause. Yet, if this were so, it would be the conservatives of this world who are the "materialists" and the revolutionaries who are moved by "idealism"!

In fact, of course, "materialism" and "idealism" do not refer to vague moral attitudes of this kind. They are terms used in philosophy to describe the only two basic interpretations of the world which can be consistently held.

Everyone who studies the world around him has to find the *origin* of things. What causes things to move, or to act or to behave in the way they do? Are the forces spiritual in origin or are they produced by the material world?

Some years ago a Calvinist minister ascribed earth tremors in the Western Cape to the growing disquiet of the Almighty toward modern forms of music and dress! Whereas a *materialist* seeks to explain the world of society and nature according to the material conditions and processes at work, the *idealist* believes that events take place because of the existence of spiritual forces or "ideas".

An idealist might argue that apartheid in South Africa has been brought about by the "ill-will" or "evil intentions" of white people who don't wish to face up to reality. For a materialist, on the other hand, this "ill-will" or "evil intention" still needs to be explained, and the real reason for apartheid is not to be found in people's heads but in their pockets, in that *material* system of capitalist exploitation which makes apartheid highly profitable for financial investors, factory owners and the giant farms. It is here that the roots of the system lie.

We often talk about the way in which for example "anti-communist ideas" weaken our movement by creating divisions in its ranks and this of course is true. But we must never forget that these anti-communist "ideas" don't simply fall from the skies: they reflect and arise out of the material interests of monopoly capitalism and unless they are firmly rebuffed, they are likely to make an impact on those whose

stake in society, however small, makes them vulnerable to anti-communist scare-mongering

Thus we can say that whereas idealism looks for an explanation of **the world in terms of the "ideas", "intentions" or "will" of people**, **materialism considers that the source of all events and actions is to be found in material causes or, as they are sometimes called, "the laws of nature."**

It is true that cruder forms of idealism ascribe things in the world to the "will of God" whereas more subtle forms of idealism put the cause down to the ideas which exist in the heads of individuals on earth, but in neither case do idealists seek an explanation in material reality.

Whereas idealism believes that the ideas in people's heads exist outside of and independently of the world of matter, materialism contends that people's ideas, like all other aspects of their behaviour, are the product of material causes and can only be properly understood when these causes are discovered.

Materialists in fact argue that man was neither created by God nor is his origin a sheer mystery. He developed out of the world of nature through a long process of evolution and his ideas are the product of the mental activity of his brain, itself a highly developed and complex form of matter.

This does not mean that materialists are not concerned about people's ideas. On the contrary, materialists are the only people in the world who are able to explain them properly. What materialism rejects are not ideas, or their immense importance in influencing the course of events. Rather it is the *idealist* theory of ideas which materialists challenge, because this treats ideas as mystical forces that somehow exist independently of material reality.

It is true that many people generally look for the causes of events in material rather than spiritual forces while retaining beliefs about the world of the supernatural or some other "autonomous" realm of ideas. But this merely means that they are not being philosophically consistent. The fact still remains that it is impossible to hold that matter is the product of mind (the idealist position) while at one and the same time contending that mind is the product of matter!

Materialism and idealism offer interpretations of the world which are irreconcilable. Which of the "two great camps", as Engels called them,¹ we choose still constitutes today, as in the past, the basic question of philosophy.

But why should it matter? What political consequences are likely to follow if we opt for one camp rather than the other?

To answer this question, we must turn to consider the question of

(ii) Materialism as a Rational and Democratic Outlook

If we ascribe, as the idealists do, events and actions to the will of God or to the ideas which people carry around in their heads, everything which happens is either a mystery or some kind of accidental "change of heart". To argue that events do not ultimately have *material* causes means of course, that they cannot be scientifically examined or rationally understood.

This is why idealism is not only mystical but generally conservative and elitist in character. To look for the source of movement in the world solely to people's "ideas" or the power of their "will" is to ignore the practical experience of the mass of ordinary people as they go about their daily lives - the real force which moulds our thought. Differences in outlook appear for the idealist, not as particular reflections of a given set of material circumstances, but as the product of mystical forces which nothing can change. Plato, the ancient Greek idealist, believed that men viewed the world differently because they had been "made" differently - he likened them to different metals like brass, iron and gold - and these were "differences" which nothing could change. The men of "gold" - a philosophical elite - were naturally intended to rule over the cruder multitudes of brass and iron - the unfortunate many! Is it surprising that Plato's idealism has often found a sympathetic hearing among apartheid's supporters? Racist nonsense about the "genetic" differences which are supposed to make some "races" more intelligent than others is simply the logical product of the idealist's search for "causes" which lie beyond our control, and cannot be rationally understood

For materialists, people are the product of their material circumstances and their "human nature", their outlook on life and their general psychology reflect the conditions under which they live and work. To change people you must change their circumstances. If, as the materialist argues, we draw our knowledge and character from our practical experience of the material world, then not only is everyone able to learn from life and play their part in running society (a democratic view which rejects the need for mystical "fuehrers" to govern the "dumb" masses), but changing our material conditions of life can rid society of poverty, crime, exploitation, war and all the other evils which conservatives blame on "human nature". Marx and Engels comment that if **man is shaped by environment, his environment must be made human²**, and proceed to add that "the teaching of

materialism" is "the teaching of real humanism and the *logical* basis of *communism*".³

For materialism is the only philosophy today which can rationally explain the world of nature and society and thus enable people to control their own lives and rid mankind of the injustices, inequalities and exploitation of capitalism.

But how is such a philosophy of materialism to be developed? Before materialism can serve as "the logical basis of communism", it must solve the problem which I now wish to consider, the problem of

(iii) Metaphysics and Mechanics in Earlier Materialism

In primitive communist or tribal societies, people generally explain movements in nature and relationships in society according to "spiritual" forces at work in the universe, but it is worth noting that the old legends and customary practices contain many germs of materialism in the way that they carefully mirror the features of objective reality.

It is however only when trade and advancing technology open up the world, as it were, that science develops, demonstrating that what people had thought of as "spirits" is simply the movement of matter in the universe which can be studied and understood. This discovery led early philosophers in many parts of the world to assert that the universe was solely composed of hard, material particles, out of which all forms of life, including human consciousness, were constructed.

Although theories like this were a great advance, the materialist outlook which they expressed was incomplete and inconsistent. Early Greek philosophers, for example, saw changes in the world as the result of shifting combinations of "atoms", but these "bricks of the universe" were themselves immutable. This static feature of their theory Marxists call "metaphysical" because these basic material elements in the universe were thought of as something "above" change and hence to all intents and purposes, "divine".

This problem was also evident in the materialist outlook of the great 17th and 18th century thinkers in Western Europe. Although they were able to deal many crippling blows to the mystical and hierarchical concepts held under feudalism (the "divine right" of kings, for example), the leading science of their time was *mechanics* and we call them *mechanical* materialists because they treated nature and society as if it were some giant machine. This helped them to understand how things "worked" but was unable to explain their origins and how they had *developed*. It was simply

assumed that some god-like force had set the world in motion, and it had never basically changed since!

Yet change was precisely that feature of the universe which it was more and more difficult to ignore. The rise of capitalism graphically demonstrated this. As Marx and Engels wrote,

constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones⁴

and this made a great impact on the natural sciences. As Engels has noted, the discovery of the cell, the transformation of energy and the theory of evolution named after Darwin⁵ showed that movement in the material world was not merely machine-like, but embraced many *different* forms of matter-in-motion, encompassing heat and light, electric and magnetic tension, chemical combination, life and finally human consciousness. All the new sciences pointed to the importance of development and change. It was no longer necessary to bring in some metaphysical force from outside to explain why new elements were continually arising and old ones passing away.

The time had come to bring materialist philosophy into contact with

(iv) The Theory of Dialectics.

It is one thing for natural scientists to increasingly use concepts of change and development in their scientific work, quite another for these ideas to be worked out systematically as a *general* world-outlook so that they can be consciously used to help us understand all areas of reality, including of course developments in society. This is why Marx and Engels turned to the work of a great idealist philosopher, Hegel, who had developed the theory of dialectics as an overall philosophy.

This theory of dialectics can best be understood in opposition to what we have called "metaphysics" and the main features of the theory can be formulated as follows:

Whereas metaphysics sees the world as a complex of things, dialectics examines these elements as part of an interconnected whole in which everything is related to and determined-by everything else.

Thus for example: a dialectical approach does not simply observe that Africans in South Africa are oppressed by the pass laws, work for star-

vation wages, farm the worst land, live in terrible housing' conditions etc. Each of these elements is *related* to the other and can only be properly understood as part and parcel of the *whole system* of apartheid which links them together.

Whereas metaphysics sees the world statically, looking simply at things as they are, dialectics is concerned with things in motion, as a process, ceaselessly coming into being and passing away.

Thus for example: it is not enough just to see how apartheid "works" today. We must understand how it *developed*, how the people lived before apartheid, the great struggles they fought against those who came to steal their land and destroy their institutions, how apartheid was developed as a response to an awakening African national consciousness, etc. Understanding how apartheid arose is essential to an understanding of how we can get rid of it, for the world is continually changing, and a dialectical approach highlights the *fluidity* of every situation.

Whereas metaphysics regards change as an accidental occurrence, brought on by some chance event from outside, dialectics sees change as a natural and necessary force which comes from within.

Thus for example: the mounting tide of anger and protest against oppression in South Africa which has so dramatically hit the headlines over recent months is not, as the Justice Minister seems to think, stirred up by *outside* agitators who have managed to *accidentally* escape the security police and their numerous spies. It is an inevitable development that springs from *within*, as a necessary part of that struggle which has taken many different forms and reached many different peaks, ever since the racist oppression began. Like all change, it can only be properly understood as the necessary outcome of a developing situation: it is not merely some dramatic explosion which accidentally "happened". It is true that outside conditions may "spark" off events so that they take place at one particular time rather than another: but these *external* circumstances "condition" the event, whereas the real cause of its development comes from within.

These features of the theory of dialectics form the basis for a number of general laws of dialectical development which Hegel was able to work out. Marxists consider these general laws to be of great importance for they elaborate upon and help to clarify the features of dialectical theory as noted above.

We turn therefore to briefly examine

(v) The Laws of Dialectical Development

Engels considered that these laws can be reduced in the main to three :⁶

(a) The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa

This law expresses the fact that change in nature and society does not simply involve a slow and continuous increase or decrease in the growth of things. At a certain point, new *qualities* emerge as a sharp "break" with the past or "leap" into the future occurs. Bourgeois thinkers often say that "there is nothing new under the sun" as though all we can do is to arrange different hands from the same old pack of cards! Marxists disagree. Just as in nature gradually decreasing or increasing the temperature of water (a change in *quantity*) causes it to turn into something quite different, ice or steam (a change which is *qualitative*), so in life generally, gradual changes of degree which do not affect the essence of a thing reach a point when the *thing itself* changes its character and a new entity emerges.

Thus in South Africa for example, for a long period of time the old tribal systems slowly disintegrated as the people were forced to leave their homes and work down the mines, on the farms and in the factories, until a "leap" occurred and a new identity was born. People now saw themselves not merely as Tswanas, Zulus, Xhosas, etc. but as Africans, a *qualitative* change in the people's outlook. This made it possible on the one hand to form the ANC as a *national* political organisation and for the ANC, once formed, to fight for the development of a national consciousness among wider and wider sections of the people. This qualitative change in the people's outlook giving them a new sense of identity did not simply take place "overnight": it had been building up gradually, bit by bit, for many years before. But changes in degree do not take place for ever: a point is reached when they become changes in kind and something *new* is created.

But what causes this change to build up in this way? This aspect is focussed upon in

(b) The law of the unity and struggle of opposites.

We have already noted that change arises from *within* things as a necessary part of their development. The elements which make up an object in nature or in society are at once connected with one another and at the same time, in a state of constant struggle or, as we often say, "contradiction". Everything therefore constitutes a "unity of opposites". Capitalists for example, cannot exist without exploiting wage workers, while these workers cannot survive without selling their labour power to a capitalist. They are at once "united" - for each depends upon the

other - but as the class struggle shows, they are also "opposites", for this unity is manifest through an ongoing struggle.

This is an important law of dialectics because it helps to identify the reason why everything in the world must continue to develop. Of course, not all "struggling opposites" or contradictions should be looked at in the same way and Marxists generally distinguish between *antagonistic* contradictions, when a struggle cannot be resolved without victory for one side and defeat for the other, and *non-antagonistic* contradictions, when differences are resolved in a way which leaves all the constituent elements intact. Thus, whereas under capitalism, the contradiction between worker and capitalist is an antagonistic one, under socialism, contradictions remain but with the gradual disappearance of classes, antagonism dies out.

At all times, in other words, the unity and struggle of opposites continues, for without the operation of this law in nature and society, no real change could take place at all.

But what is the relationship between the old and the new as change occurs? This is demonstrated by

(c) The law of the negation of the negation.

Negation in dialectics, as Engels has pointed out, does not mean simply saying no, or declaring that something does not exist, or destroying it in any way one likes.⁷

"Negation" involves the movement of something from an old stage to a new *and higher* stage, so that the elements of the old are carried forward *and reworked* into the new. Just as capitalism "negated" feudalism by using the former serfs and craftsmen in its new labour force, so socialism "negates" capitalism by building upon its social production and advanced technology. When we speak therefore of the "negation of the negation" we do not merely mean that something has changed twice over. We mean that there has been a *spiral* development upwards, carrying the past into the future, remaking it in the process.

Negation therefore has a *negative* side which conservatives ignore when they think that there is no real "break" in development, so that, for example, they forget that the African worker who has spent years of his life living and working in the cities, struggling with his comrades for more money, better conditions and the right to belong to a trade union, is a very different sort of person from his grandfather or grandmother who lived in a tribal community farming the land in the period before colonialism. Ironically white supremacists are often acutely conscious of the force of

this "negation" when they argue that Africans are supposedly too "primitive" to understand the complexities of trade unionism and would therefore use their trade unions as political weapons in the struggle against apartheid! But if negation has a negative side, it also has a *positive* side, which anarchists and ultra-leftists ignore when they fail to see that revolutionaries must build upon the traditions of the past, carrying over what is healthy and democratic and discarding what is backward and reactionary. This is clearly a crucial task for African revolutionaries to undertake.

Hence the law of the negation of the negation helps us to understand change *both* as a break with the past and yet at the same time, a development from it. Having looked briefly at the three general laws of dialectical development, we are now in a position to consider my final point relating to

(vi) Dialectics and Materialism: the Marxist Synthesis

Just as earlier materialism was weakened, as we have seen, by metaphysical and mechanical ideas, so the theory of dialectics and its laws of development as conceived by Hegel suffered from one insoluble problem. Hegel was an idealist and hence treats dialectics as movement in the realm of ideas or as Hegel conceived it, the development of a "World Spirit". Contrary to his theory of dialectics which looks at the world as a process of *infinite* development, the Hegelian "World Spirit" was assumed to have a "beginning" (the reason for which no one could explain) and "an end" (which quite arbitrarily had come to rest with the creation of the capitalist system!). It is not too difficult for Marxists to see that the earlier materialists were not *completely* materialist and the earlier dialectical thinkers were not *consistently* dialectical, because in both cases, the uncritical acceptance of a system of exploitation and the division of society into classes made these philosophers unable and unwilling to see everything, including "human nature" and private property, class privilege and social inequality, subject to the necessary forces of *change*.

Marx and Engels were able to bring dialectics and materialism into a fruitful synthesis because they were the first thinkers in history to base their philosophy on the revolutionary needs and aspirations of the working class, the only class in history which has absolutely nothing to lose from change. This is why other sections of society, the peasants, shop-keepers, intelligentsia, small traders and housewives, who will also benefit from revolution need to ally themselves with the working class and its Communist Party and follow the philosophy of the working class, dialectical materialism.

As early as 1845, Marx and Engels commented that

the standpoint of the old materialism is "civil" (or bourgeois) society; the standpoint of the new is *human* (or communist) society . . .⁸

for the "new" materialism is dialectical materialism and dialectical materialism is the only philosophy which, in guiding us in the long and difficult struggle to win a national democracy, build socialism and enter into the epoch of communism, will always welcome change.

Notes

1. "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy", Marx, Engels, *selected Works*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p.604. This is an invaluable piece to read for anyone seeking to learn more about the development of Marxist philosophical thought.
2. "The Holy Family", in *Collected Works 4*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p.131.
3. Ibid.
4. "Manifesto of the Communist Party", *Selected Works*, op. cit., p. 38. In Africa the effect of these expanding waves of capitalist production was traumatic. As one writer recalls, "the 15th century hurled at us the economic and adventurous restlessness of Europe, and subsequently the mania called the 'Scramble for Africa' shuddered the sub-continent. The sheer physical impact of the assault was enough to stagger the edifice of tribalism. I can almost see my infinitely great-grandfather, leaping to his feet on a rock and gaping at a sailing ship seeking harbour - all his patriarchal dignity forgotten, as he exclaims, 'Hau!' " - Can Temba, "The Bottom of the Bottle," *Africa South in Exile* 1961, p. 53.
5. Engels expands upon these points in his introduction to the *Dialectics of Nature* and in his chapters on philosophy in *Anti-Duhring*.
6. *Dialectics of Nature*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), p.63.
7. Cited in *The Fundamentals of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy*, (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974), p.153.
8. "Theses on Feuerbach", reprinted as an appendix to *The German Ideology*, (Lawrence and Wishart, 1965), p.653.

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